Off Our Lawns and Out of Our Basements: How We (Mis)Understand the Millennial Generation

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Abstract

In this article, the author explores the existing research on the characteristics of Millennials within historical, social, and economic contexts. While many researchers have made claims about Millennials, they fail to consider how parenting styles, economic factors, historical events, and shifts in educational priorities may have created the unique traits of this generation. Further, many of the findings about Millennials have come from limited data sets and flawed analyses. The author provides some suggestions for future studies and offers a new perspective that may prove useful to researchers in the area of emerging adulthood and the Millennial generation.

In recent years, many people have been seduced by the notion that today’s adolescents and young adults are somehow more self-interested and narcissistic than any previous generations in history (Twenge & Campbell, 2009; Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008). A substantial amount of recent research concerning adolescents and emerging adults has examined trends in psychosocial indicators such as narcissism, civic engagement, and moral development. The current consensus is that the current generation of youth (usually referred to as The Millennial Generation) is more self-focused, less autonomous, and significantly delayed on a number of moral developmental indices. Now, the popular rhetoric revolves around one question: What hope do we have for the future when future leaders, policymakers, parents, and citizens are seemingly unable to look up from their smartphones to acknowledge the existence of other people?

Background

In their frequently cited 2008 article, Twenge and her colleagues found that college students’ narcissism scores had increased one-third of a standard deviation between 1982 and 2006 (Twenge et al., 2008). Other research showed that today’s young people exhibit levels of narcissism consistent with those of celebrities (Young & Pinsky, 2006) and that using social networking sites elicited higher levels of narcissism in college students (Gentile, Twenge, & Campbell, 2010). Some speculated that the increased use of communication

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technologies might be to blame for this increase in college students’ narcissism (Saculla & Derryberry, 2011).

Simultaneously, researchers in the area of moral development began to see sharp declines in Postconventional moral reasoning and other indicators of moral judgment development around the turn of the 21st century (Chung, Bebeau, You, & Thoma, 2009). In the neo-Kohlbergian perspective on the development of moral reasoning, the Postconventional schema represents the highest level of moral reasoning. The Maintaining Norms schema represents a less-developed, law-and-order morality, and the Personal Interest schema represents the least-developed, most self-interested way of moral reasoning. Measures of moral judgment development within this theoretical perspective, such as the Defining Issues Test-2 (DIT-2), examine moral schema preference to assess an individual’s moral reasoning development (Rest, Narvaez, Thoma, & Bebeau, 1999).

The most recent findings on moral judgment development in college students are a source of discouragement to researchers and practitioners alike. Since the year 2000, when the Millennial Generation entered college, average scores on the DIT-2 among college students have declined slightly. In some samples comprised of college students, Personal Interest reasoning has persisted longer and the gains in Postconventional reasoning are less than in previous cohorts. In some samples, there were no statistically significant differences in moral judgment development between first-year students and seniors within the same institution (Mechler, 2009).

Civic Engagement

Although indices of moral development have been on the decline, recent cohorts of high school and college students have been reporting significantly higher levels of volunteerism and political engagement. Eighty-two percent of high school seniors and over 30% of college students reported that they have engaged in some kind of unpaid community work (Handy et al., 2010). These data are consistent with Howe and Strauss’s (2000) prediction that the Millennial Generation would be more concerned with others and involved in their communities than previous generations.

However, some researchers have expressed skepticism about these trends. Many high schools and colleges have implemented programs and curricular elements that mandate community service in order to graduate. In addition, the increased competitiveness of the collegiate admissions process has essentially compelled applicants to engage in community service in order to enhance their résumés, and in turn, the odds of gaining admission to a desired college or university (Handy et al., 2010). This trend is consistent with Millennials’ predilection for conformity and Maintaining Norms moral reasoning, in that these actions are a means of meeting an externally directed objective. In a 2009 study, the highest levels of volunteerism and philanthropy were found among college students whose dominant moral schema was Maintaining Norms. Further, most of their volunteer efforts occurred within organized religion or Greek letter contexts (Mechler, 2009).

Sander and Putnam (2010) noted that a decades-long decline in political interest in high school and college students began to reverse in 2001 on the heels of the 9/11 attacks. Between the years of 2001 and 2009, more students reported that they kept up with political news, discussed politics with others, and voted in elections than in previous years (Sander & Putnam, 2010). As noted in Putnam’s groundbreaking book Bowling Alone, there was a steady decline in general civic engagement in the United States from the 1960s into the 1990s. During this period, increasingly fewer Americans joined social organizations, voted, or expressed trust in their fellow citizens (Putnam, 2000).
Locus of Control

Recent studies have shown a more external locus of control in the current generation of youth. A person with a more external locus of control is likely to be more extrinsically motivated and to see himself as a passive agent in his life. External locus of control has been shown to relate to negative social indicators such as alienation and decreased self-efficacy. Between the years of 1960 and 2002, college students’ locus of control moved significantly toward external, which could reflect a reduced sense of responsibility and self-efficacy in the current generation of youth (Twenge, Zhang, & Im, 2004). Further, emerging adults are expected to develop self-authorship, which entails the independent development of one’s perspective, in their transition to adulthood. Modern-day conceptions of adulthood define an adult by his or her ability to make decisions, fulfill responsibilities, interact with diverse others, and handle conflict, all of which necessitate self-authorship. A lessened feeling of responsibility and agency or others can impede the development of an adult perspective (Baxter-Magolda, 1998).

These findings have caused concern for parents, teachers, administrators, all of whom have a vested interest in the outcomes of today’s Millennials. Media outlets frequently run stories about the struggles of Millennials, many predicting widespread trouble in the foreseeable future. However, it may be useful to examine these findings more thoroughly, to explore how the data were collected, and how these findings relate to one another.

Methodological Issues

An overarching problem in the research on Millennials is that the findings rely primarily on college students. Yet, researchers claim that the data represent traits exhibited by an entire generation of young people. In the United States, approximately 39.6% of all people ages 18–24 are enrolled in some sort of institution of higher education (Pew Research Center, 2009). It may be misleading to extrapolate the findings to population-level conclusions when the data come from only the 18–24 year-olds who are enrolled in higher education.

Related to this concern is the problematic nature of cross-temporal meta-analyses. Twenge and her colleagues (2008) have relied on this method of data analysis to arrive at some of their more provocative findings, such as the increase in college students’ narcissism. However, these data come from studies that were not originally intended to generalize to the population. These data came from studies of limited samples of college students whose demographic characteristics do not always correspond to those of their noncollegiate peers. These college students were generally first-year or sophomore students in psychology courses, and did not necessarily reflect the diversity of the student bodies at their respective institutions. Further, Twenge and her colleagues relied on the sample means from each of the studies they used and not on individual data points. In doing so, they potentially misrepresented the strength and direction of the correlations between the construct of interest and the year of the study. The $d$-metric approach in estimating effect size employed by Twenge and her colleagues could, by their own admission, overestimate the effect size (Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2010; Twenge et al., 2004). This methodological problem prevents any realistic understanding of potential cohort effects, and weakens their claims that constructs such as narcissism and locus of control have shifted so significantly.
A Different Perspective

Given the dearth of reliable and valid empirical evidence supporting these claims, perhaps it would be more constructive if we explored the societal shifts that may have contributed to any of the qualities attributed to Millennials. Although people in individualist societies tend to hold people responsible for their own dispositions and outcomes, humans naturally exist within a complex societal web. What societal factors, then, might explain actual differences one could find in Millennials as individuals and as a whole?

Increased Adult Mediation

According to Gray (2011), over the past 30 years, the number of hours children spend per week engaged in unstructured free play has declined by nine hours. Further, the role of adults in mediating children’s play has increased dramatically. This practice contradicts findings from numerous studies that have shown that allowing children time for unstructured, peer-directed play fosters the development of conflict resolution skills, creativity, self control, emotional regulation, and overall well-being (Gray, 2011). These shifts in childhood experiences inevitably influence later developmental outcomes.

Increased Economic Competition

Nearly 40% of 18–24 year-olds are pursuing postsecondary education, but their prospects upon graduation have become increasingly bleak in the wake of two recessions in the past decade. Among recent graduates, over half are either unemployed or underemployed (Altavena, 2012). This underutilization of young workers creates a gap between the students’ expectations of life after graduation and their lived experiences post-graduation. Worse yet are the employment prospects of people who did not attend college; 33.6% of recent high school graduates not attending college in 2011 report being unemployed (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012a). There is simply an insufficient supply of jobs for the number of graduates produced at all levels. Additionally, the increased numbers of students pursuing higher education have increased the competition for gaining admission. In the spring of 2012, many Ivy League colleges and universities reported that their acceptance rates of applicants were at a record low (Ellis, 2012).

After successfully running the gauntlet of college admissions and completing the requirements for a degree, many members of the Millennial generation are finding themselves without employment. As of August 2012, 22.2% of all Americans ages 20–34 were unemployed. Those who have found employment have encountered lower wages, which will have implications for their long-term earnings (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012b). With these bleak employment prospects and depressed wages, many feel a sense of disappointment or anxiety at their unfulfilled potentials.

Adulthood Redefined

These economic factors have necessitated changes in Millennials’ lives and expectations. The pervasive lack of opportunities has many young adults returning to their childhood homes after graduation, hence the term Boomerang Generation. Living with one’s parents without employment may necessitate a delay in the attainment of traditional markers of adulthood, such as beginning a career, purchasing a home, marriage, and raising children. According to a report issued by the U.S. Census Bureau, the average age at first marriage increased from 22 years in 1970 to 27 years in 2010 (Kreider & Ellis, 2011).
Given a longer period of time in which one can explore career and identity options, many of the Millennial Generation are putting off adulthood, particularly among middle-and upper-income emerging adults. In some cases, this delay is of the Millennial person’s choosing. In others, the choice has been made for him because of lack of employment or insufficient wages. In either case, this delay prevents an emerging adult from experiencing many of the developmental milestones necessary to acquire an adult identity (Arnett, 2007).

**Shift in Societal Perspectives**

Another question remains: Why do older generations perceive such a great difference between themselves and Millennials? Eibach, Libby, and Gilovich (2003) found that adults who experienced major life events perceived that particular aspects of the world had changed in significant ways when in fact it had not changed. For example, most parents perceived that an increase in crime coincided with the birth of their first child. Further, parents indicated a much higher increase in social dangers than did nonparents. People whose financial situations had changed or who had acquired additional knowledge on a subject also noted that their perspectives on society had changed. These research findings suggest that the current generation of adults may be reacting to changes in their personal circumstances and not changes in society as a whole. Perhaps the older generation’s perspectives on today’s youth are more formed by the changes in their own lives than in any actual difference between the youth of today and yesteryear.

**Looking to the Future**

There are two particular trends that could be a result in less-than-optimal outcomes that merit further research. Chief among those are the increase in adult mediation with the corresponding decline of autonomy and self-efficacy. In a comparison study of three disparate cultures, Ochs and Izquierdo (2009) found that middle-class parents in the United States had much lower expectations for children’s self-sufficiency and contributions to household tasks than did parents in Peru and Samoa. The children in the Peruvian and Samoan tribes were engaging in helpful behaviors as early as three years of age, while Ochs and Izquierdo noted that children as old as nine years seemed to be unable to care for themselves in rudimentary ways. They theorized that the intensive parenting style adopted by parents in the U.S. inhibits children’s sense of moral responsibility, social awareness, social responsiveness, and self-reliance.

Another noticeable trend that could be a cause for concern is the decline of moral judgment development in Millennials. This problem is rooted in two findings: One, that the college years are no longer a time of significant growth in moral reasoning; and two, students are now entering college with lower DIT-2 scores than indicated in previous generations. While college and universities should reflect on how best to reverse the former trend, it seems most productive to focus on what can be done in the years prior to the college years to cultivate moral reasoning.

The answer could lie in shifting our expectations of children’s responsibilities, as discussed in Ochs and Izquierdo (2009). Without a consistently reinforced sense of social and moral responsibility, children do not have the developmental experiences known to foster higher levels of moral reasoning. If many of today’s college students grew up in this milieu, it follows that moral judgment development would decline accordingly.
Conclusion

While there has been a great deal of research on the Millennial generation over the past decade, it appears that we still have work to do before we can understand them. One significant line of inquiry to be pursued involves the marked paradox of declining moral reasoning alongside increased volunteerism and civic engagement. What motivates the typical Millennial to engage in these behaviors when he or she may not see these actions as explicitly moral actions? If we wish to understand the origins of the developmental outcomes observed among this generation, we have to delve into the past to see where Millennials began. Perhaps longitudinal studies will reveal that today’s young people are indeed not so different from their predecessors, and they will go on to become productive and well-adjusted adults. Or, we may find that the aforementioned shifts in parenting practices, economics, and education have opened a veritable Pandora’s box. In either case, it is premature to label an entire generation based on limited samples of people who are only beginning to enter adulthood, particularly when there is much we do not understand about them.

References


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